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## **Hong Kong**

### **Market Development Reports**

# **Snack Foods Containing Stevioside Taken Off Of Hong Kong Supermarket Shelves 2002**

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#### **Report Highlights:**

On March 19, the Food & Environmental Hygiene Department, announced the recall of four products thought to contain the banned sweetener - stevioside. On the following day, it cleared one of them, Nissin Tasujin Tonkatsu Ramen Instant Noodle, but recalled 13 more types of snack food. Presently, fourteen products have been confirmed to contain the ingredient. Two are suspected of containing the chemical.

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Includes PSD changes: No  
Includes Trade Matrix: No  
Unscheduled Report  
Hong Kong [HK1], HK

On March 19, the Food & Environmental Hygiene Department, announced the recall of four products thought to contain the banned sweetener - stevioside. On the following day, it cleared one of them, Nissin Tasujin Tonkatsu Ramen Instant Noodle, but recalled 13 more types of snack food. Presently, fourteen products have been confirmed to contain the ingredient. Two are suspected of containing the chemical.

The 16 recalled products are: Notchoro sweetener, Kiku Prawn Crackers, Kariri biscuit sticks, Glico Chocolate Pretz, Milk Chocolate Pretz, Kowbesen cuttlefish crackers, Ikons Marin Shrimp Caceres, Nissin Cup beef Upon noodles, Nissin Cup Curry Upon noodles, Nissin Cup Tempura Upon noodles, Kiku Cuttlefish Crackers, Diet Sugar, Pringles Potato Crisps (Mild Salt Flavor), Glico Kiss Mint, Nissin UFO Oomori Yaki Soba Instant Noodle and QQ Mark Sunflower Seeds.

The food recall in Hong Kong is a result of the recall action taken by the Singaporean government on several brands of instant noodles and crackers that were found to contain stevioside, a sugar substitute not approved for consumption in either Singapore or Hong Kong. The sale of food containing the artificial sweetener will contravene the Food Adulteration (Artificial Sweeteners) Regulations. The maximum penalty is a fine of HK\$50,000 (US\$6,452) and imprisonment for six months.

Most of the products involved are Japanese products, including snack foods and instant noodles. Pringles is the only American product on the recall list. There are 10 Pringles flavors in the Hong Kong market, the one being recalled is Pringles Potato Crisps (Mild Salt Flavor). According to a P&G representative, the flavor was first designed for the Japanese market and has been in the Hong Kong market for about 20 months. It is manufactured in the U.S., but not sold on the U.S. market.

Stevioside is a glycoside of the diterpene derivative steviol. Steviol glycosides are natural constituents of the plant *Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni, a plant native to South America. It is sweet to the taste. The Hong Kong government regards it as artificial sweetener. It is not listed as one of the 10 permitted artificial sweeteners as stated in Hong Kong's food ordinance. Similarly, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not approved it for use as a food additive in the U.S., although it can be used as a dietary supplement. The FAS/WHO Joint Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) considered stevioside in 1998, but concluded that it was not possible to allocate an Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) on the data available.

The incident is still developing and could have a major impact on snack food sales in Hong Kong over the coming months. In 2001, Hong Kong's total imports of snack foods amounted to US\$234 million. Major suppliers included China (US\$50 million); Japan (US\$33 million); S. Korea (US\$21 million); and the U.S. (US\$19 million). Stevioside is allowed as a food additive in countries like Japan, Taiwan, China and Korea, all major suppliers of processed foods to the Hong Kong market. It is believed that many products circulated in the Hong Kong market contain this banned chemical which is not labeled on the package.

Hong Kong labeling regulations allow food manufacturers to either declare the exact name of the food additive, or simply the general category to which the food additive belongs, such as a preservative or a coloring agent. The Hong Kong SAR government has proposed that the

regulations be amended to require that the exact name of the additive should be declared on food labels. For example, instead of stating "preservative", which fulfils the requirement of the existing legislation, more detailed information such as "preservative(sodium nitrate)" would have to be declared. The proposed amended Regulation is being vetted by the Legislative Council.